



The Lincoln Kinsman

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The Paternity Myth

THE SOURCE, GROWTH, AND REFUTATION OF THE FALSE STORIES
ABOUT LINCOLN'S ORIGIN

The nomination of Abraham Lincoln as the Republican candidate for the Presidency of the United States in the election of 1860 immediately directed attention to his origin and early history. At that time there is known to have been available to newspapers but one biographical sketch of him. This story of about two thousand words was published in the *Chester County* (Pennsylvania) *Times* on February 11, 1860, and later copied in many newspapers throughout the country. It became the source of practically all of the post-convention news items relating to the life of Lincoln. The story did not contain the names of his parents or any other biographical material of much importance.

This very meager biographical source, the lack of vital statistics, Lincoln's own reluctance to say very much about himself, the fact that his own mother died when he was too young to take an interest in the names

of his forebears, the confusion of some of his kinsmen about their relation to him,—all these things contributed to the cultivation of an ideal seed bed for the myth about Lincoln's paternity.

The Source of the Myth

Within a week after the Chicago Convention Samuel Haycraft of Elizabethtown, Kentucky, wrote to Mr. Lincoln making some inquiries about his parentage. On May 28, 1860, ten days after the nominations were made, Mr. Haycraft received the following letter:

"Dear Sir: Your recent letter, without date, is received. Also the copy of your speech on the contemplated Daniel Boone Monument, which I have not yet had time to read. In the main you are right about my history. My father was Thomas Lincoln, and Mrs. Sally Johnston was his second wife. You are mistaken about my mother. Her maiden name was Nancy Hanks. I was not born at Elizabeth-

town, but my mother's first child, a daughter, two years older than myself, and now long since deceased, was. I was born February 12, 1809, near where Hogginsville (Hodgenville) now is, then in Hardin County. I do not think I ever saw you, though I very well know who you are—so well that I recognized your handwriting, on opening your letter, before I saw your signature. My recollection is that Ben Helm was first clerk, that you succeeded him, that Jack Thomas and William Farleigh graduated in the same office, and that your handwritings were all very similar. Am I right?

"My father has been dead near ten years; but my stepmother is still living.

"I am really very glad of your letter, and shall be pleased to receive another at any time.

"Yours very truly,

"A. Lincoln".

Lincoln's reply indicates that Haycraft had submitted for Lincoln's confirmation the history of the family as remembered by the citizens of Elizabethtown. Fifty-two years had elapsed since the brief residence of the Lincolns in the town.

Abraham very frankly wrote to Haycraft, "You are mistaken about my mother. Her maiden name was Nancy Hanks." He then mentioned that Sarah Johnston was the second wife of Thomas. It was also necessary to correct Haycraft's opinion about Abraham's birthplace, and Lincoln advised him he was not born in Elizabethtown but his sister was born there. Apparently there was no attempt on the part of Lincoln to obscure any family history for he invited Haycraft to write again.

The people of Elizabethtown had confused the entire Johnston history with the Lincoln story and not only made Mrs. Johnston the mother of Abraham but identified Mrs. Johnston's son John with him. The story about Abraham, "the little shirt tail boy," and his mother being seen often in Elizabethtown about the court house was in reality the story of Sarah Johnston and her son John. The cabin in which the widow Johnston had lived was photographed in its dilapidated condition in an alley in Elizabethtown and widely advertised as the birthplace of Abraham Lincoln, although it was never occupied by the Lincolns.

When Samuel Haycraft learned that Abraham Lincoln's mother's maiden name was Nancy Hanks, it would be natural for him as the county clerk to search for the Lincoln-Hanks marriage record. Of course he failed to find it, as Lincoln's parents were not married in Hardin County.

The older citizens remembered, however, that there was a young woman by the name of Nancy Hanks who lived in the community where Abraham Lincoln was born. They also recalled that she became the mother of an illegitimate child, a boy. It was this mother and child that undoubtedly gave rise to the story of Abraham Lincoln's questionable paternity.

After it became known generally that the name of Lincoln's mother was Nancy Hanks and that a person by that name in Hardin County was a woman of ill-repute, other communities began to discover that once upon a time a certain Nancy Hanks lived in their midst, and it was not difficult to find some man who was said to have

betrayed her. So the paternity myth became a maize of contradictory stories all evolving about some girl by the name of Nancy Hanks.

Lincoln undoubtedly heard some of these stories during the political contest of 1860, and the fable probably took on many different forms before the campaign was over.

Not only are we able to trace the origin of the myth to a mother and child in Hardin County but also to the individual who first sponsored the myth.

Herndon informed Ward H. Lamon that "Prentice got up some evidence on this question in 1860." (Hertz p. 69.) The Prentice referred to must have been George D. Prentice, editor of the *Louisville Journal*. According to *Appleton's Cyclopedia of American Biography*, his paper won a reputation for "political ability, wit, and satire." He was not a zealous supporter of President Lincoln's administration, and as far as we can learn he was the first person to gather evidence tending to support the illegitimacy of Abraham Lincoln.

As has been indicated, the factor contributing most to the origin of the paternity myth was the presence of two young women in Kentucky with the same maiden name of Nancy Hanks. One of these girls was the daughter of Joseph and Ann Hanks, and she resided in Hardin County near the place where Abraham Lincoln was born. Her illegitimate son Dennis Friend Hanks was born May 15, 1799, and his father was Charles Friend from whom he received his middle name. This Nancy Hanks, the mother of Dennis, later married Levi Hall in Hardin County and had several children by him.

Nancy Hanks, the mother of Dennis, was living with her sister Elizabeth Hanks Sparrow at the time of the birth of Dennis. It is likely that at some time she may also have visited her brother Joseph, a carpenter in Elizabethtown, which could have given rise to the story that Thomas Lincoln first met his wife Nancy in Joseph Hanks' carpenter shop. It is not strange that the stories associated with Nancy Hanks Hall should become associated with Nancy Hanks Lincoln.

Nancy Hanks, the mother of Abraham, was the daughter of James and Lucy Shipley Hanks, according to the best evidence available, and there is a probability that James who died when Nancy was an infant was a brother of the Nancy Hanks Hall who was the mother of Dennis. This would make Nancy Hanks Hall an aunt of Nancy Hanks Lincoln.

The two Nancy Hankses did not live within twenty-five miles of each other during their early years, the mother of Abraham Lincoln living in Washington County and the mother of Dennis Hanks in Hardin County. By the time they were both living in the same county they were married and bringing up families.

In 1873 John G. Nicolay wrote to Charles Friend of Sonora, Kentucky, stating that he had seen a letter written by Friend to Robert Lincoln which stated that Rev. Alexander McDougal had married Lincoln's parents and that a daughter of the preacher, a Mrs. Middleton, was still living. Nicolay asked Friend to help trace the story. A letter written thirteen years later by A. M. Brown to Col. R. T. Durrett of Louisville offers a good sequel to the inquiry.

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This Brown letter, dated May 12, 1886, states that an old lady living in Larue County claimed Thomas Lincoln and Nancy Hanks were married near the site of Lincoln's birthplace and that "Nancy had one child before the marriage to Thomas Lincoln, a son, the father of whom was named Friend." Mrs. Middleton had confused Levi Hall with Thomas Lincoln, Nancy Hanks Hall with Nancy Hanks Lincoln, and Dennis Friend Hanks with Abraham Lincoln, and the wedding recalled was the wedding of the Hardin County Nancy Hanks to Levi Hall. The story by Mrs. Middleton further confused biographers, and it was then put in circulation that Dennis Hanks and Abraham Lincoln were children of the same mother.

The Growth of the Myth

William Herndon was really the master myth-maker when one considers the growth of the paternity myth. He claimed to know all the particulars of the story as early as 1861 or 1862. He gave the illegitimacy story wide publicity, first through private correspondence, then through Lamon's publication and subsequent writings which used this source. On February 25, 1870, he wrote to Lamon, "I am convinced that the weight of evidence is that Mr. Lincoln was an illegitimate," and then he said that he had held this belief for years. (Hertz p. 63.) The Lamon biography published in 1872 states with reference to Lincoln's mother, "Of Nancy Hanks' marriage there exists no evidence but that of mutual acknowledgment and cohabitation." (p. 10.)

The three-volume Herndon work published in 1889 did more to call attention to the questionable paternity of Lincoln than all other influences combined, and it was largely this book that made current the wide-spread tradition that both Lincoln himself and his own mother were illegitimate children. In the preface of his book Herndon had made reference to the fact that Lincoln came from "a stagnant putrid pool," and then he set out to prove it.

Apparently Herndon's theory about Lincoln's illegitimacy was originally built on an unwarranted inference which he drew from the Haycraft letter already copied verbatim. In 1870 Herndon told Lamon that Haycraft "wrote to Mr. Lincoln about his mother, evidently to find out some facts." (Hertz p. 69.) Ten years later Herndon claims that to one man (Haycraft) who was endeavoring to

establish a relationship through the Hanks family, he simply answered, "You are mistaken in my mother," without explaining the mistake or making further mention of the matter. (Hertz p. 68.) This last statement was absolutely untrue as Abraham Lincoln in the very next sentence in the letter did explain the mistake when he said, "Her maiden name was Nancy Hanks." There is no evidence that Haycraft was seeking any special facts about Lincoln's mother in preference to other family history of the Kentucky Lincolns or trying to establish a relativity through her. Herndon lifted the statement, "You are mistaken in my mother," out of its context and made it the great mystery theme of his paternity myth.

The universal criticism which was brought down on the head of Herndon for his part in circulating these myths was justified, and when the book was reprinted in two volumes three years later, the introduction and the two arguments about the origin of Lincoln and his mother were deleted.

Many reputable Lincoln authors using the Herndon sources continued to feature the paternity myth, and as recent a writer as Albert J. Beveridge to the very last of his life sincerely contended that Abraham Lincoln was an illegitimate child. The editor of the *Lincoln Kinsman* has often talked with Senator Beveridge on this subject, and there are letters in the files of the Lincoln National Life Foundation which present the Senator's viewpoint. The use of the original Herndon manuscripts undoubtedly brought him to the decision he finally reached about Lincoln's paternity. (Hertz pp. 391-394.)

The Beveridge conclusion was based primarily on the supposition that Thomas Lincoln was physically deficient. On July 16, 1924, the editor of the *Kinsman* received a letter from Mr. Beveridge asking particulars about some medical attention given to the Lincoln family. This was one of the series of questions asked: "What was the amount of the doctor's bill paid by Thomas Lincoln to some physician whose account you discovered, the name of the physician, and most especially the date?"

Beveridge was given the answer to each question. The amount of the bill was \$1.46, the doctor's name was Daniel B. Potter, and there was no date on the bill which was paid some time previous to 1817 when the deceased Dr. Potter's estate was settled. Dr. Potter lived in the county but three years, 1811 to 1814, so the attention given the Lincoln family must have been between these dates, probably in some way connected with the death of the little boy Thomas. (Warren pp. 269-270.)

Beveridge can hardly be excused, however, for moving this medical service back into the period previous to the birth of Abraham Lincoln and associating it with illness of the father. (Beveridge p. 21.)

Since the publication of the Herndon manuscripts by Emanuel Hertz the public may now read the whispered statements about Abraham Lincoln's origin that only Lincoln students have known heretofore.

The Refutation of the Myth

The refutation of the paternity myth will not consist of a series of denials brought against more than a

dozen contradictory stories about Lincoln's origin now in print, but the review of certain episodes in the history of the Lincoln family will nullify all the various claims of Lincoln's illegitimacy.

Thomas Lincoln had lived from the time he was ten years old (in 1786) until he was twenty-seven (in 1803) a short distance from the home of Richard Berry in Washington County. In the Berry home there lived his wife's sister's daughter, Nancy Hanks. In the three years that followed Thomas had lived near Elizabethtown, but it is not likely he had forgotten the niece of Richard Berry, and it is evident that he paid her a visit very soon after arriving from a boat trip to New Orleans on May 3, 1806. We are sure of this fact, that he had proposed marriage to Nancy Hanks by May 16, and possibly many months before that date.

On the above date Thomas purchased at the Bleakley and Montgomery store in Elizabethtown material for his wedding outfit, which contained thirteen itemized articles, including cloth for a new suit, the entire account amounting to over nine pounds. A week later he purchased another bill of goods which included three yards of coating which alone cost him three pounds four shillings and sixpence.

These purchases were made possible by the following credits given him by Bleakley and Montgomery, namely, 16 pounds, 10 shillings opposite the citation "going to New Orleans," and 13 pounds, 14 shillings, and 7½ pence opposite the item "gold."

On June 2, 1806, Thomas purchased a "tipt bridle" for his horse,

and two days later some "sundries" are charged to him. No more entries appear under his name at this store until after his marriage to Nancy Hanks a week later.

It will not be necessary to use any space to tell about the marriage of Thomas Lincoln and Nancy Hanks in the home of Nancy's guardian, Richard Berry. The official marriage return can be observed in the Washington County, Kentucky, Court House.

Thomas Lincoln and his wife Nancy Hanks Lincoln located in Elizabethtown by June 14, two days after the wedding, and on that day Thomas purchased at the Bleakley and Montgomery store "½ set of knives and forks" for five shillings, and 3 skeins of silk and other purchases for his wife were made during that first week of their married life. On August 4 Thomas was charged with half a dozen spoons.

No one can deny that Thomas and Nancy Hanks Lincoln continued to live in their cabin home in Elizabethtown during the year 1807, and they were taxed for two house lots and improvements. On January 15 Thomas purchased at a sale at the residence of Thomas D. McIntire a dish, some plates, a basin, spoons, etc., for which he paid \$8.92.

We are also certain that the Lincolns lived within the town limits as Thomas paid the town tax. The town was established in 1797, thirty acres laid off into town lots, and soon a building ordinance was passed specifying the type of cabins which must be built within the town. Building restrictions would not allow the erection of pole cabins; the logs had to

be hewed and proper chimneys constructed.

The first child of Thomas and Nancy Lincoln was a daughter named Sarah for Mrs. Lincoln's cousin, Sarah Shipley Mitchell, who had been her girlhood playmate. The date of this daughter's birth is not known to have been recorded until the year 1851.

Abraham Lincoln visited his step-mother in Coles County, Illinois, a short time after his father's death on January 17, 1851, and at that time made some entries in an old Bible in possession of the family, using three divisions, marriages, births, and deaths. He did not record the date of his mother's birth or the date of her marriage, but he did note the day of her death. He attempted to write down the vital statistics about his sister Sarah and was somewhat confused about certain dates which he tried to remember. Her birth had occurred forty-four years before, and she had been dead for twenty-three years. Her mother had been dead for thirty-three years and her father was also dead. Abraham did remember the date of his sister Sarah's death and recorded it as January 20, 1828. He did not know the day of her marriage. He cites the date of her birth as February 10, 1807, and in this he may or may not have been correct. It might be noted that Mr. Lincoln made no record of the birth or death of his brother Thomas.

There has never been any serious question raised about the paternity of the first child Sarah. All those who have attempted to describe her, including the members of the family into which she married, claim that

she resembled her father Thomas Lincoln. She now becomes a very important factor in the proof of Abraham Lincoln's legitimacy, as most of the stories circulated in 1860 about the parentage of Lincoln have no place for a sister older than Abraham. Most of the gossip in circulation claiming Abraham's illegitimacy makes him the first child of an unmarried woman.

Great stress has been brought to bear on the place where a certain Nancy Hanks may have been living at the time Abraham was born. It might be more important to learn where Mrs. Thomas Lincoln was living when the unborn life of her first son began. There can be no doubt but that she was living in the Elizabethtown cabin with her husband Thomas and her year old baby girl Sarah in the all important month of May, 1808.

On May 8, 1808, Thomas Lincoln was served with a summons in an appeal from a decision made in his favor in a magistrate's court. Lincoln had a contract for getting out lumber for a mill in 1807 and had to sue to collect his bill. The case was appealed by the defendant and on May 9 the county court confirmed the magistrate's decision in favor of Thomas. On May 15 Thomas was again in court and credited with a fee in the same suit, and on May 31 the defendant filed a countersuit. Inasmuch as this litigation occurred in the very town where Thomas Lincoln was living, his residence in Elizabethtown, Kentucky, for the month of May 1808 is positively established.

The Bleakley and Montgomery store book also contains some import-

ant entries for 1808, and in April of that year Thomas was given credit for sundries amounting to 20 pounds 1 shilling and four pence to pay in full his account for goods purchased from the store. On May 13, 1808, nine months lacking one day before Abraham Lincoln was born, a new account opened by Thomas Lincoln was charged with "3 dozen buttons" at a cost of four shillings and six pence.

Many other entries for the year 1808 in the record books of Hardin County confirm the residence of Thomas Lincoln and his wife in Elizabethtown during the year 1808. The tax reports establish the Lincoln residence within the town limits. It was also in this town late in the year 1808 that Thomas Lincoln made a trade with his close friend Isaac Bush for the 340 acre farm now known as the Lincoln Birthplace Farm, for which Thomas paid Isaac two hundred dollars in cash.

With these facts before us, what is the implication which one must draw if he holds to the illegitimacy of Abraham Lincoln? It is simply this, that some man instead of leading an ignorant girl astray, violated the chastity of a home where there was a young wife and mother who had a daughter a year old. It is certain, however, that none of the more widely circulated stories about Lincoln's origin do place the scene of the betrayal of Lincoln's mother in the Thomas Lincoln cabin at Elizabethtown.

One or two other statements might be made in concluding this monograph. There was another child born to Thomas and Nancy Lincoln about two years after Abraham's birth who was named Thomas Lincoln, Jr., for his father. Therefore Abraham was not the first or the last child of his parents but was born two years after the first child and two years before the last child.

On many occasions Abraham Lincoln said, as in the Haycraft letter, "My father was Thomas Lincoln." He wrote several letters to members of the Lincoln family about his kinsmen and he confirmed several relationships on the strength that his father was Thomas Lincoln. He often said he was named for his grandfather Abraham Lincoln who was massacred by the Indians.

To one relative Jesse Lincoln he wrote, "There can be no doubt that you and I are from the same family." He inquired of David Lincoln, "Do you know anything of your family or rather I may now say our family, farther back than your grandfather?" (*Kinsman* No. 21.) These letters and others similar to them were written ten years before his name was placed before the Chicago Convention.

He is said to have told one of his friends that after the expiration of his incumbency at Washington, he was going to try to trace his ancestry. How foolish all these family inquiries and assertions if there were no Lincoln blood in his veins.

Albert J. Beveridge, *Abraham Lincoln*, Vol. I. Houghton Mifflin Company, Boston and New York 1928.

Bleakley and Montgomery, *Day Book*. Photostat copies in Lincoln National Life Foundation. William H. Herndon, *Lincoln, The True Story of a Great Life*, Vol. I. Belford, Clarke & Company, Chicago, New York, and San Francisco 1889.

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